

July 19, 2015
Colossians 3:13

Getting Along With Imperfect People

Who are the most troublesome people in your world? Whose names and what faces come to mind?

I can think of two. The first, and the one I have the most trouble with, is me—the face I see in the mirror every morning. I can be inconsiderate, mean-spirited, uncharitable, foolish, lazy, contemptuous, condescending, critical, harsh, demanding and impatient. Which is why the virtues we looked at last week—compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience—speak so powerfully to me. Every one of them exposes places in my soul that are not yet glorified and in need of grace. Every one of them, when they do show up in my relationships, is a testimony to the transformation God is working in me by the presence and power of his Holy Spirit. In my natural self, I can be one of the most troublesome people I know.

The second troublesome person in my world is everyone else. All of us share a dubious heritage passed down from our first parents. We are by nature, each one of us, active participants in what we inherited from Adam: an inexorable propensity to foolishness, selfishness and wrong-doing.

When we came to faith in Jesus, God did some magnificent things in us and for us. He **forgave** us all our sins and removed the judgment of condemnation hanging over us because of our real moral guilt. He **rescued** us from Satan's realm of darkness and **transferred** us into the kingdom of his son, Jesus, the Christ, a kingdom of love and light. He put his Spirit in our hearts and declared our bodies to be holy temples—we are **embodied masterpieces of his own presence in the world**. He took away our cold, stony hearts and gave us hearts of flesh upon which he is inscribing his truth, **transforming** us from the inside out to be conformed to the image of his Son. Our heavenly Father adopted us into his family and we were immersed by Jesus in his Spirit into Christ's body, the church. We are now brothers and sisters in Christ, quite literally joined together as members of one another.

By God's grace we are not who we were! At the same time we are not yet who we will be when we stand complete in Christ. We are still an imperfect bunch. In addition to our cultural differences, differing family traditions, quirky personal preferences and expectations, we have broken places in our hearts, old sinful behaviors and habits that still show up from time to time. **And all of us come together in this glorious multi-faceted, multi-generational mash-up of still-messed up people called the church—people who are becoming like Jesus, but aren't quite there yet.**

I have to deal with troublesome me, and then I have to deal with troublesome you. How do we do that, especially in the daily-ness of ordinary life? What keeps us moving toward each other in Christ when the cracks show up, when our sinful natures leak out?

▣“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Colossians 3:12-13 ESV).

Verse twelve tells me how I must deal with my troublesome self in relationship with troublesome people. Verse thirteen tells me how I must respond when those troublesome others do things about which I might rightly complain.

We looked at verse twelve last week. Paul's exhortation is firmly grounded in our new identity as a people who are part of God's new humanity in Christ. We are God's chosen people—God picked us to be on *Team Jesus*; we are holy—set apart as special for God; and we are beloved—dearly loved by God. Since we are all these things, we are to put on Jesus' uniform, to dress ourselves in his character.

All of the virtues to which God calls us are relational virtues. They tell us how we must act as people who are becoming like our Lord. So we put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

And then in verse thirteen we are called to conduct ourselves toward others just like God conducts himself in relationship to us.

▶ The first grace we extend to others is within what scholars call the ‘semantic range’ of patience—clusters of words with related meanings. If we could read a First Century Thesaurus and look up the entry for “patience,” our word, “bearing with,” would be included.

The word translated “bearing with” describes an active choice to endure, to patiently hold up in the face of something. Jesus used it when disappointed with his disciples’ unbelief: ▶ “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to *bear with* you” (Matthew 17:17 ESV)?

In more colloquial language, we might say, “put up with one another.” The only problem with that paraphrase in the context of Colossians 3 is that “putting up with” sometimes lacks the grace God intends for us to exercise. For us, putting up with someone can feel like condescension or grim resignation.

Perhaps a better paraphrase might be this: “Graciously cut each other some slack.”

Solomon wrote: ▶ “Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to *overlook* an offense” (Proverbs 19:11 ESV).

Isn’t that how God treats us? King David wrote: ▶ “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities” (Psalm 103:10 ESV). A few verses later he added: “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:13-14 ESV).

God takes into account our very human weaknesses and bears with our failures. We do not receive immediate retribution—what we deserve—when we sin. We call that mercy, not getting what we deserve.

God is this way because more than anything, he desires to bring us back into relationship with himself. Peter wrote: ▶ “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9 ESV).

God's patience is a kindness extended to us to give us space to come to our senses, repent of our wrongdoing, and seek God's pardon. If God treats us this way, and God is working in us to make us like Jesus, it only makes sense for us to offer others the same mercy. Again, Peter urges us: ▶ "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since *love covers a multitude of sins*" (1 Peter 4:8 ESV).

A whole bunch of loving one another in the Body of Christ consists simply of mercifully and graciously putting up with each other's idiosyncracies, failures and lapses—cutting each other some slack.

▶ "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7 ESV).

While Susie and I were engaged, we read Tim Keller's excellent book, *The Meaning of Marriage*. Keller says marriage is first of all a friendship. He writes: "Real friends always let you in, and they never let you down."

Then he quotes Dinah Craik, a Nineteenth Century British novelist who wrote of "...the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person—having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but pouring them right out, just as they are, chaff and grain together; certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then with the breath of kindness blow the rest away."

What a beautiful image. Bearing with each other is very much about creating a safe environment for each other in which we "keep what is worth keeping, and then with the breath of kindness blow the rest away."

Bear with each other.

And then Paul adds: ▶ "...forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

Here's another Kellerism: "The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope."

One of Satan's premiere devices is to constantly remind us of past sins—shameful, wretched things we have done which can paralyze us with regret. He will beat us up with them if we let him. But his trick backfires if we immediately go to God's promise that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, and fall again upon the amazing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A. W. Tozer wrote: "A truly penitent man who has realized the enormity of his sin and rebellion against God senses a violent revulsion against himself [that's the inner sense of shame we instinctively feel]... But peace has been established, for the blows have fallen on Jesus Christ. He was publicly humiliated and disgraced as a common thief, wounded and bruised and bleeding under the lash for sins He did not commit, for rebellions in which He had no part, for iniquity in the human stream that was an outrage to a loving God and Creator."

If God has been so enormously gracious to us and laid his "outrage" at our rebellion and guilt on Jesus instead of us, how can we not wish to extend to others what we have so undeservedly received?

▶ Forgiven people are forgiving people.

This is more than a lovely thought. It is an obligation laid upon us. We are in the tall grass if we do not extend to others what God has freely given to us.

In the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, Jesus said: ▶ "...forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, *neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*" (Matthew 6:12-15 ESV).

Once Peter had a question about forgiving. Matthew writes: ▶ "Then Peter came up and said to him, 'Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times'" (Matthew 18:21-22 ESV).

Peter thought he was being generous, offering to forgive the same guy seven times in a row. Jesus stood his assumption on it's head. And then Jesus told a parable about a man who owed his ruler ten thousand talents, probably of silver. A talent weighed about seventy-five pounds. That's seven-hundred-fifty thousand pounds of what we assume to be silver. Which equals roughly twelve-million ounces. At current price of \$24.00/oz., that would be about \$286 million in today's dollars. It is a staggering amount—over a quarter of a billion dollars.

The ruler called in the loan and the man was unable to pay. With unimaginable mercy, the ruler forgave his debt.

When he left, the forgiven man met someone who owed him the equivalent of five months wages for a common laborer. Take your monthly income and multiply it by five. Significant but not an insurmountable amount.

Matthew writes: ▶“...seizing him, [the man who had been forgiven \$286M] began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt” (Matthew 18:28-30 ESV).

This is how Jesus finished the story: ▶“Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ▶So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart”(Matthew 18:32-35 ESV).

In Scripture we discover something I call the law of spiritual reciprocity: God frequently mirrors back to us how we treat others.

For instance, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus said: ▶“Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you” (Luke 6:36-38 ESV).

That's spiritual reciprocity.

Forgiveness is a choice to absorb the slight, the loss, the hurt, and **release** the offender from our right to get even, to exact our pound of flesh. Forgiveness is something we do in our hearts and usually on our knees before God, *before* we ever pursue reconciliation with the one who offended us. Jesus taught: ▶“And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses” (Mark 11:25 ESV).

Who do you know, maybe even in this church, who has offended you so deeply that you have vowed never to forgive them? You're still holding on to an old grudge. Stack what they did up against the enormity of your guilt before God. If God has forgiven so much, and you feel even the slightest gratitude for that forgiveness, how can you withhold forgiveness from them?

The standard is high: ▶“...as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”

This can raise more questions than it answers. Does forgiveness mean I have to reconcile with someone who continues to hurt me and act as if all is OK?

Short answer: No.

Forgiveness positions you to be open to reconciliation. Reconciliation is closely connected but a separate thing requiring repentance on their part. What you give up in forgiveness is your perceived right to justice, to get even, to make them pay, to ghost them. Sometimes the best you can do is release them from personal vengeance and commit them to God's justice.

Forgiveness also enables you to let go of bitterness. Because if we do not forgive, if we continue to cherish resentment and vengeful thoughts toward the one who has wronged us, by an inexorable law of the soul we will put down roots of bitterness which Scriptures tells us will defile many.

▶Nurturing bitterness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die (variously attributed).

Most of us deal mostly with garden variety offenses. We can forgive others without ever saying a word, cutting them some slack.

It may be that this is enough of an issue that you will need to sit down with them and have a gentle, loving conversation. In most cases, that's all it takes.

Paul doesn't answer all our questions in this brief passage. But he says enough to get our attention and expose places in us where we are not treating one another as God has treated us.

As God's chosen people, special for God, dearly loved, and undeservedly forgiven, generously cut each other some slack, and forgive each other. We are the Body of Christ, his holy bride. We are members of one another.

We are a forgiven people. Be forgiving people.

Benediction:

“May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15:5-6 ESV).